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Teaching Peace in Fearful Times

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A STATEMENT BY THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD Revised May 2005

American children, fed a nonstop toxic diet of electronic-media images, are increasingly fearful about the threats of war, terrorism, crime, and other forms of violence. The threats, in some cases, are real. In other ways, they are greatly exaggerated by our preoccupation with violence and gore, which inundates children — and adults — daily on television, movie, and video-game screens.

Many parents and teachers are asking for an antidote. The Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit partnership of educators, health-care professionals, and other advocates for children, first published its guidelines for peace education in December 2001. Now we have revised and expanded that guide, titled [Ten Steps for Peace Education](#).

In times of fear we tend either to seek security and hide away or to rush forward and attack. But these are not the only options. How can we help children face the world with courage and equanimity? How can we educate them for a life of caring and compassion when the news

is full of stories of hatred, revenge, and cruelty? How can we prepare them to work through conflicts in creative ways?

The answer is a new commitment to peace education. Teaching about peace can touch the lives of children at every level — in the home and at school, in both local and global communities.

"It is easy to teach children about war," says Joan Almon, U.S. coordinator of the Alliance for Childhood. "It is much more challenging to teach them how to create peace. In war, we draw lines and barricade ourselves against the enemy. Educating for peace means building bridges between people across every divide, including ethnic, racial, religious, and national lines."

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, many new toys and games that glorify violence were marketed to children as young as age three. These include realistic toy weapons and battlefield gear.

These kinds of toys "focus children's play on violent themes, undermine lessons adults teach, and bring in scary real-world themes young children cannot fully understand," notes the Toy Action Guide published by [TRUCE](http://www.truceteachers.org/), a national organization of educators concerned with how toys and entertainment affect children's play and behavior (<http://www.truceteachers.org/>).

"Such toys may fulfill a need for adults to feel patriotic or support U.S. troops," says Diane Levin, professor of education at Wheelock College and author of *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times*. "But they often channel children into narrowly scripted play, and convey a message that violent play is okay and exciting. Children need more open-ended play materials that enable them to be creative and imaginative and to work out their own needs."

Choosing toys wisely is one way for adults to begin teaching peace to children. But there are many others as well. The Alliance's brief guide outlines ten concrete steps to take at home and at school for peace education.

Education for peace emphasizes communication and

collaborative problem-solving, as well as empathy for others. In introducing children to the needs of others, the challenge is finding the right balance — to awaken compassion without overwhelming children with the troubles of the world. What is offered needs to match the child's age and ability to understand.

As many others have said, peace is not just the absence of war. It is an active state, requiring continual renewal and strong commitment throughout our own country and around the world.

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